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Translation As a Social Fact

Sergey Tyulenev

ABSTRACT

The article proposes a re-reading of classical works of one of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim, in their applicability to translation research. It is argued that, since translation is a social phenomenon, TS, in theorizing translation, should learn from sociology in order not to reinvent the wheel. It is suggested that the sociology of translation should be distinguished from the psychology of translation in a methodologically clear way. Within the sociology of translation, studies of individual translations and translators, unless put into social context, do not help understanding translation as a social phenomenon. Methodology of the sociologically informed study of translation should not rely on common sense, which more often than not turns out to hamper, rather than help to see translation as a sociological phenomenon. In other words, translation is shown as a social fact and the need to study it as such is strongly emphasized.

KEY WORDS: sociology and psychology of translation, Emile Durkheim, translation, social fact

1. From Syncretism to Synthesis through Analysis

Translation Studies (TS) is at a bifurcation point. If the history of TS can be described as a series of turns (Snell-Hornby 2006; 2010), then there are more or less clear signs that studying social involvements of translation with the help of sociological theory may also be seen as yet another turn (Wolf 2010). It is being discussed in TS today whether translation should consider translator or translation, whether agency or structure should be the primary focus of translation research. The deeper implication of this sort of discussions, which does not seem to have been fully appreciated, is whether we should be content staying in the psychological domain, perhaps now and then drawing inspiration from sociological theories, or to incorporate the latter fully into our purview. Moreover, we face another issue—which of the two domains, psychology or sociology, if any, should be given pre-eminence? Not everybody may have realized the predicament of combining the two, but the predicament is there and should be resolved somehow: the hybrid of psycho-sociology created because we do not know better will not survive.

It seems that preferring translators to translations, thus putting the ‘translators vs. translation’ dilemma outside the ‘sociology vs. psychology’ polemics, does not contradict our sociological pursuits but, emphatically, no study of translators is possible without understanding what constitutes translation as a social phenomenon. Such understanding may be scientific or only commonsensical, but behind any TS research there must be an implied understanding of what constitutes translation as a social practice. Indeed, how can translator be called *translator* without explicit or implicit, scientific or at least commonsensical, clear or vague but some sort of vision of the type of action¹ which s/he performs and by virtue of which s/he may be called *translator*? If anybody arguing for relativizing the definition of translation would inquire in a deeper way into how s/he

conducts her/his translation research, there will be found an idea, perhaps well-hidden yet still lurking beneath the surface, of what translation is, for how can one start any research without at least a working idea of what is to be researched?

By the same token, translation as agency is only the other side of translation as structure. No matter how hard we try, while unravelling the interplay of structure and agency in translation, to debunk the structure's primacy, we end up bumping into structure at the end of all our syllogistic paths and passages in the maze of even the most sophisticated pro-agency argument. Indeed, agency is structuralized by and is further structuralizing its structure because as fish cannot live without water, agency cannot exist without structure. Anthony Giddens hits the nail on the head when he writes that what "Durkheim frequently refers to as the "cult of the individual," is created *by society*: it is this very fact which demonstrates the inadequacy of utilitarianism as a social theory, because what it takes as its premise is actually the outcome of a long-term process of social development" (1971: 211).

Reality is much richer than any binaries but when priorities of scholarly research come to the fore, the point is not to find a theory which would describe all reality in all its complexity, because that is impossible. Any scholarly research inevitably reduces reality: any binary research—at the expense of showing the continuum; any non-binary research—at the expense of the clarity of the involved oppositions. Thus, as in theology, in order not to be condemned as a heretic, one starts "Credo in Unum..." but continues naming all the hypostasies of the Trinity or *vice versa*, in sociologically informed studies, the other type of research should be acknowledged.

The problem in science is that there is a methodology of research which would be different depending on whether we start at one of the extremes or focus on the continuum in between. The challenge, therefore, is how to find such an angle which would allow the scholar to conduct a methodologically clear study of the phenomenon in question because otherwise, s/he has neither guarantee for her/himself nor any convincing proof for others that the results of his/her research are valid.

Syncretism is not to be confused with synthesis. The former implies an amalgamation of phenomena mixed when one does not know better; the latter implies putting things together after studying them separately and coming to the conclusion that in order to understand the whole better, the studied parts are to be brought together again. Syncretism is *ante*; synthesis is *post*.

No doubt, it is necessary to conduct research from both the viewpoint of translator/ess' socialized individuality and from the viewpoint of translation qua social phenomenon, but as it turns out, that is not easy: neither good intentions, nor glazing (socio-)biographies with a few sociological terms and dropping magic names of sociological luminaries make the research a valid piece of sociologically informed scholarship, if the rest is old good life-stories with conjectures about how the translator felt or might have felt at school or at work and of what he dreamt (as if the translator confessed to the researcher). Such attempts remain quite superficial despite their professed sociological ambitions, because what they really try to aim at is socio-psychology, but that, first, requires a clear understanding of the nature of both psychological and sociological research. Otherwise, the work is one thing on the level of theoretical ambitions and something quite different on the level of application. The conclusions drawn from such studies tend to be little more than commonsensical

platitudes having little explanatory force and as little applicability to biographies of other translators in the same region or beyond. In other words, psychology and sociology, like water and oil, remain separate and no socio-psychology results.

My contention is that since translation is intrinsically a social phenomenon, which is a well-established fact in TS today, its social aspects which should be factored in, even if we conduct a study of an individual translator's practice or output. That is why it is imperative to be clear in what sense and to what extent translation is a social phenomenon. This means that we cannot rely on our commonsensical understanding of translation as being influenced by / influencing society, and therefore (as simple as that!) being a social phenomenon. Such view is more advanced than seeing translation as only a matter of linguistic equivalence, but nevertheless only commonsensical: a social phenomenon is understood as something somehow related to society. Such is the underlying logic of nearly all sociologically minded TS research. And then the researcher, considering Square One as read, boldly steps into Square Two: How is translation related to society? Some explain it according to this sociological theory, some according to that, but the very fundamental question has escaped TS scholars' attention all the way since they have started talking about translation in relation to sociology; without the ABC of sociology they have jumped over to Bourdieu, Lahire, Luhmann, Latour, Callon, Giddens, Renn, etc. As a result, not all in TS are convinced that translation is *social* to the extent that we need sociological theories; and those who are convinced (with rare exceptions) tend to churn out commonsensical, if not amateurish, psychological-cum-sociological case studies.

Syncretic psychological-cum-sociological study of translation will not do because what we aim at is a *synthetic* psychological-cum-sociological perspective, which, however, should pass the stage of the 'psychological vs. sociological' perspective. Then, when we know what the difference between the two is and how much psychology and how much sociology there is in translation, we can proceed to conducting more complex synthetic studies. The present-day TS is rather at the syncretic stage of its psycho-social efforts.

A few words about terminology are called for. Translation has been considered as a social action in the sense of social activism (Zlateva 1993; Way 2008). There is nothing wrong in terming translation a social action in that sense, yet when we mean translation's involvements in social processes, arguably, sociology and its established terminology must be our Ariadne's thread. Sociology has been exploring the nature of the social for more than a century and has developed a finer sociological researcher's toolkit than TS can boast. In sociology, the term 'social action' has a century-long usage. But the point is not even the term and there is no use in waging a war of terms—the concept behind it is at stake. My immediate purport is not so ambitious as to analyze the applicability and potential of sociology for TS in general. My task is much humbler: I would like to bring to translation scholars' attention some important writings of one of the fathers of modern sociology—Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). His works are recognized as timeless classics and, I believe, are of special relevance for TS at the bifurcation, referred to above, because he grappled with the same issues—what exactly makes the social social. So, let us go back to Square One...

There is no need to feel ashamed of having to learn from the sociology of Durkheim. In doing that, TS is joining a few other disciplines, including sociology itself

(Thompson 2004: xiii). Classics, such as Durkheim, “set a historical precedent which allowed others, later sociological analyses to develop” (Fish 2005: 4). Since TS is only starting to explore its object’s social properties, such classics of sociology as Durkheim’s should surely be welcomed as a basis for further development.

At the turn of the nineteenth century (1890s–1917), Durkheim, as Kenneth Thompson claims, “contributed more to the founding of modern sociology than any other individual before or since” (Durkheim 2004: 1). Durkheim formulated the fundamental notions of sociology, such as ‘social fact’; he also outlined a strictly sociological method as well as produced a series of case studies where he demonstrated how to apply his method, among them—*The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) and *Suicide* (1897), which will be in the centre of my discussion here. In 1898, Durkheim founded the journal *L’Année sociologique*, in which he published his own works and the works of his students with the goal of advancing sociology as a full-fledged scholarly discipline. Durkheim’s publications were, in Thompson’s words, “calculated to shock,” “his approach [being] deliberately counter-intuitive and opposed to taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and causes of social phenomena” (Durkheim 2004: 2). Durkheim insisted that sociology had to have its own subject matter irreducible to any adjacent sciences’ subject matters, among them psychology and, particularly, the utilitarian philosophy’s view of society “as an aggregate of individuals acting rationally in terms of utility and self-interest” (Durkheim 2004: 2).

To be sure, there have been developments in how social action is described in sociology after Durkheim, and I will incorporate some of such developments in my argumentation; but considering them in application to translation in a fuller way should become the subject of separate studies. Durkheim’s theory is taken up here in the conviction that his is the fundamental theory of social fact and such view of it warrants its re-reading as the basis of the present study. The focus on Durkheim’s theory can also be justified as a first step since no application of his fundamental theory has ever been attempted in TS.

In what follows the terms *psychology* and *sociology* are used in Durkheimian sense, the most important difference between them is that the former seeks to explain individual actions, whereas the latter—collective. Durkheim defined sociology in *The Rules of Sociological Method* as “the science of institutions, of their genesis and of their functioning” (2004: 3). Such view of society, as we shall see, stores a great deal for the translation scholar.

2. Sociology vs. Psychology

Translation is a social phenomenon and, therefore, it should be studied sociologically. Sociological study of translation prompts us to apply to translation all properties of social action and, first of all, separate them from psychological phenomena. Durkheim insists, as the biological realm is separated from the psychological, so the psychological should be separated from the social. This leads to an important methodological requirement: “[...] we refuse to explain the more complex in terms of the more simple” (Durkheim 2004: 54). This means that in our study we should never confuse individual and collective actions, yet that is not to say that we cannot study individual actions; the point

is how we explain what we observe—in terms of simpler psychological or more complex sociological reasons.

In one of his classical works, showing how even seemingly purely individually (psychologically) determined actions may be, fundamentally, social actions, Emile Durkheim takes suicide as an example. Can suicide be of interest to the sociologist? Suicide seems to be “the act of an individual that concerns only that individual,” depending “entirely on individual factors,” therefore perhaps, it should interest only the psychologist because suicide is “normally explained by [an individual’s] temperament, his character, his antecedents and the events of his private history?” (Durkheim 2006: 21) But Durkheim disagrees with this commonsensical view of suicide and statistically shows that, in different periods of their history, different societies have different dispositions toward suicide, that is, the relationships between the number of suicides and the total population. The statistical expression of these dispositions is the rate of suicide-mortality of the society in question (Durkheim 2006: 24). It is such dispositions that come “within the orbit of sociology” (Durkheim 2006: 28). The focus of Durkheim’s attention is clearly kept apart from reasons for particular suicides; he investigates only larger pictures—more general conditions which determine the social rate of suicide:

It is clear that the two questions are quite distinct, whatever relationship may otherwise exist between them. Among individual conditions, there are surely many that are not general enough to affect the ratio of the total number of voluntary deaths to the population. These may perhaps lead this or that isolated individual to kill himself regardless of whether the society as a whole has a stronger or weaker tendency to suicide. Just as these do not relate to a particular state of social organization, so they do not have any social repercussions. As a result, they concern the psychologist, not the sociologist. What the latter investigates are causes through which one may act not on individuals in isolation, but on the group. Consequently, among the factors of suicide, the only ones that concern us are those which have an effect on the whole of society. The suicide rate is the product of these factors, which is why we must concern ourselves with them. (Durkheim 2006: 28-29)

Durkheim’s inquiry into the social nature of suicide proceeds, firstly, to show that extra-social causes of suicide are quite restricted (neither the so-called suicidal monomania nor any psychopathic state cannot be considered as having “regular and incontrovertible relation to suicide” (cf. Durkheim 2006: 39, 64)); secondly, to determine the nature of the social causes and the mechanism of their affecting different social groups and societies; and thirdly, to define the social element in suicide and its relationship with other social facts.

We see that as the sociologist, Durkheim first and foremost separates the psychology from the sociology of suicide. The clarity of this methodological stance allowed him to find and describe what hitherto had been misunderstood—that suicide, contrary to common belief, is constituted primarily as a social action. As Richard Sennett summarizes, “*Suicide* asks us to focus on such matters as family size, nuclear family structure and upward mobility [...]; it cautions us against looking for answers based on individual psychology” (in Durkheim 2006: xxiii).

To be sure, translation is quite different from suicide in many ways. For example, it may be argued that the exposure to social influences in translation is longer, sometimes life-long, than rather in an impulsive decision to take one’s own life voluntarily. But as Durkheim showed suicide, however impulsive, is a result of continuous social forces

acting upon the person committing suicide. It is this part—the social influences—that is in the centre of his sociological pursuit; it is the social influences that make suicide and translation comparable. Therefore, the translation scholar can definitely learn from Durkheim's study of suicide as an example of the application of sociological method. This is especially important because it is difficult—in such, commonsensically, individual actions as suicide and translation—to see the social through the individual. To cite Richard Sennett once again:

The facts about which people are immediately conscious are misleading. Beneath this layer, people feel and think in other channels: my family is small or absent (egoism); I am not fighting beside my comrades (altruism); my success feels empty (anomie). [...] Very few suicides are likely to leave a note which explains, 'I am putting a pistol to my head because of anomie'. (*In*: Durkheim 2006: xxii-xxiii).

And yet anomie it is nonetheless.

To be sure, there are dynamics between the external and internal, psychological and sociological, in each suicide or translation case.

In contemporary terms this sort of issues arises in debates about, for example, the way in which the personal is political [...] Society is always both inside and outside—and Durkheim was well able to recognize this. (Craib 1997: 32)

But first of all, arguably, he wanted to establish the sociological side of the problem:

[...] social facts [...] are external to and internal to (i.e. internalised by) any given individual; and they are only external to all existing individuals insofar as they have been culturally transmitted to them from the past. (Lukes 1971: 190)

Regrettably, the present-day TS cannot boast a clear vision of translation as an object of sociologically informed research. Although the understanding that translation is a socially determined phenomenon has been steadily gaining ground, a large amount of research has been a mixture of biographies, portraits of translators and translators, exciting stories about translators' successes and failures, with accounts of translators'/translations' influences on society—the latter's language and culture, national(istic) discourses, mediation during war or peace, etc. To preclude any misunderstanding, this critique is not to be understood as a denial of socially relevant research, rather stating the lack of methodological clarity when psychological and sociological facts are not distinguished and are presented largely indiscriminately in a piece of research with little justification of putting them together. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is exactly why Durkheim criticized early sociologists:

everything that we know about the way in which individual ideas combine together can be reduced to those few, very general and very vague propositions that are commonly called laws of the association of ideas. As for the laws of collective thinking, they are even less well known. Social psychology, whose task it should be to determine these laws is hardly more than a word which denotes all kinds of varied and imprecise generalities, without any defined object. (2004: 56)

Sociology views human actions as “elements of wider figurations” (Bauman 1990: 7-8). This means that human actions are seen as performed by mutually dependent

actors. This mutual dependency is understood as the probability of each social action, its performance or/and its chance of success, being determined directly or indirectly by relations between actors. Sociology considers human actions in “webs of mutual dependence” (Bauman 1990: 8). Single actors interest sociology as units in networks of interdependencies. This point of view which is fundamental for sociology is sometimes forgotten when, for instance, in their attempt to apply Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, some translation scholars use *habitus* interchangeably with *biography* or *life stories*. For example, in Torikai 2009, chapter 3 “Habitus” starts as follows: “In this chapter, life stories of the five pioneer interpreters in their earlier years will be introduced” (p. 49). The next chapter associates another Bourdieu’s concept *field* with life stories: “In this chapter, life stories of the five interpreters will be examined focusing on the beginning of their career, to see how they went into the ‘field’ of interpreting” (p. 85). Bourdieu’s concept *habitus*, however, is fundamentally sociological (aiming at seeing “the *social* in the *individual*, the *general* in the *particular*” (Bauman 1990: 10)) and cannot be reduced to *biography* or *life story*, because its focus is the interdependence of actors, their being influenced by society and their influencing society, nothing less than this two-way traffic—towards to the actor and from him/her, and especially the complex nature and divers dynamics of this traffic.

In present-day TS, describing *habitus* is quite popular and is seen to be as a balanced solution of undesired binary oppositions ‘individual vs. society’ and ‘agency vs. structure’. Yet depicting a translator’s *habitus*, which boils down to describing how s/he came to love books, grew up and went to school in a bilingual/bicultural (multilingual/multicultural) environment and then, as a grownup, translated despite/according to socially determined tendencies—is not the translator’s *habitus*, but a biography; such descriptions explain little if TS in its sociological pursuits is to claim to be a scholarly discipline with the ability to go beyond individuals and be able to generalize studied phenomena. I do not argue against case studies in TS, what I argue is that the scholar should look further and ask her/himself, after conducting a case study: *What does the study of a particular, of an individual show us about the general, which is general because it is collective?*

Social phenomena cannot be explained by psychological factors, therefore, “in order to understand the way in which society conceives of itself and the world that surrounds it, it is the nature of society and not that of individuals which must be considered” and “even if individual psychology held no more secrets for us, it could not provide the solution to any one of [social] problems, since they relate to orders of facts of which it is ignorant” (Durkheim 1982: 40-41). If so, what does a deeper understanding of a life story of a translator tell us about translation?

To preclude any misunderstanding, psycho-sociological research was not denied by Durkheim, contrary to superficial criticisms:

But once this difference in nature [between psychological and social facts] is acknowledged one may ask whether individual representations and collective representations do not nevertheless resemble each other, since both are equally representations; and whether, as a consequence of these similarities, certain abstract laws might not be common to the two domains. Myths, popular legends, religious conceptions of every kind, moral beliefs, etc, express a different reality from individual reality. Yet it may be that the manner in which the two attract or repel, join together or separate, is independent of their content and relates solely to their general quality of being representations. While they have been formed in a different way they could well behave in their

interrelationships as do feelings, images or ideas in the individual. Could not one, for example, believe that proximity and similarity, contrasts and logical oppositions act in the same way, no matter what things are being represented? Thus one arrives at the possibility of an entirely formal psychology which might form a common ground between individual psychology and sociology. This is maybe why certain minds feel scruples at distinguishing too sharply between the two sciences.” (Durkheim 1982: 41)

Susan Jones considers criticisms levelled at Durkheim for, allegedly, neglecting micro-questions and psychology as based on misunderstanding or insufficient knowledge of Durkheim (Jones 2001: 132-133).

Determining causes giving rise to a social fact are to be found among antecedent social facts, and “not among the states of the individual consciousness” (Durkheim 2004: 76), because the collective consciousness is distinct from the individual consciousness, though “it can only be realised through individuals” (cited in Lukes 1971: 184).

Durkheim explains the break between psychology and sociology by referring to the break between biology, physics and chemistry. The difference between social and psychological facts is not only that of quality, but of a substratum, environments and conditions of their existence. Social and psychological facts have completely different natures because they are different representations:

The mentality of groups is not the mentality of individuals; it has its own laws. The two sciences [psychology and sociology] are, therefore, as clearly distinct as two sciences can be, whatever relationships there might otherwise be between them. (Durkheim 2004: 55)

If TS had a clear understanding of this, there would be no difficulties with Luhmann’s theorizing of society as composed of social actions and not of human beings. There could be disagreements and different argumentation could be suggested, but Luhmann’s views would be not, as they are, a stumbling block for quite a few of translation students. There would not be naïve attempts to explain translation as a social phenomenon by showing individual translators/translators and their experiences, that is, “by the states of the individual consciousness,” rather, instead, there would be more research on “collective representations” going far beyond simple generalizations about collective representations as means of expressing how “the group thinks of itself in its relations with objects that affect it” (Durkheim 2004: 55). Groups, the object of sociological study, and individuals are constituted differently and are affected by different things. Hence,

representations which express neither the same subjects nor the same objects cannot depend on the same causes. To understand the way in which a society conceives of itself and the world that surrounds it, we must consider the nature of the society, not the nature of the individuals. (Durkheim 2004: 55)²

The sociological view of translation (qua social action) implies drawing larger pictures, going beyond any particular individual translation act or translator/interpreter as an individual. In the particular, we should strive to see more general—socially relevant—patterns. We should include into our vision translation as a sum total of all past, present, future, actualized and possible translation events, the aim being to study translation as a particular social phenomenon different from any other social phenomenon—a social phenomenon *sui generis*—manifested in a particular translation act(or).

If, on the contrary, translations are to be viewed as intrinsically individual manifestations of individual wills, resisting larger generalisations, then each translation act becomes an object of primarily psychological research. In the latter case however, it becomes not quite clear how we can identify different psychological acts as belonging to translation activity. If such fundamental question is impossible to resolve, what can we say about the ways (from the modern viewpoint) of handling texts and languages and emerging national cultures in antiquity or middle ages (McElduff and Sciarrino 2011)? On which basis can they be compared (or can they?) with modern social phenomena to which we refer as translations (Swansea 2010)? Or on what ground can different regional types of mediating texts between languages and cultures be juxtaposed (Bandia et Bastin 2010; Ricci and Van der Putten 2011)?

It cannot be overemphasized that declaring and theorizing translation as a psychological act inevitably brings us to a logical impasse. Indeed, if translation acts are psychological acts then how do we account for connection between them? The principle *Translation is whatever called translation* would no longer do, because our epistemology turns out to be based on common sense, and such ground, as postcolonial research makes only too clear, is shaky and cannot claim to be scientific. At this point, no matter what our convictions are, we have to acknowledge the social backdrop against which all *translations* are *translation*, all individual translational phenomena are translational systemic phenomena, all psychologically studied translator/interpreter-related phenomena should finally be sociologically accounted for; otherwise, our research should be limited to the study of the role of mental and emotional factors for translational activities. Whenever we go beyond the psychological phenomena, we inevitably end up in the soci(ologic)al domain.

To emphasize, when translation's definition is left to translation practitioners and consumers of translation-as-a-product, which is implied in letting translation be whatever is called translation, is again suspect from the epistemological point of view. What if somewhere at some point of history what we would call *translation* was not referred to as translation at all? Shall we include this phenomenon into our research or leave it because it is not called *translation*? What if what we call translation is called *match-maker* or *bird-decoy* and some other not less surprising things (Cheung 2011) or if translation is compared to a Californian's turning car (Robinson 1991: 261)? These questions may be turned the other way round: What if something is called translation, as is the case in some types of discourse, but translation means something quite different from what we are used to seeing as translation, e.g. in the actor-network theory (Callon 1986)? Shall we refuse to consider such translation as translation? But why, on what basis do we include and exclude some social activities into/from translation? *Volens-nolens* we bump into the fundamental question: what is translation? Appropriating Wittgenstein's concept *game* does not save TS either: what activity shall we attach to translational activities and what activity shall we refuse such honour? There is yet another question to be answered: What language(s) should we select for our combing of seashores of the world continents in search of translation-like phenomena?

Sociological generalizations about translation haunt us. Even if it is just one translator in focus, his/her work is impossible to account for out a social context. Translators cannot be studied without understanding what social activity constitutes them as translators. Translation is always a socialized act (Toury 1995: 53-55). Translations

which “can prove problematic, since agency can be endowed to non-human actors, institutions and organizations, while the human agents may have significant obstacles for executing their agency.”³ Commonsensical vision of translator and his/her work is based on a largely commonsensical, tacitly agreed notion of both translator and translation. If those whom we decide to study as translators are simultaneously writers, critics, lawyers, philosophers, teachers, monks, priests, kings, diplomats, etc., how do we know that they are also translators? Obviously, we are likely to hear the answer: “Because they translated.” “What does it mean to translate?”—we would press for a more precise answer. At this point, any TS scholar, who learned well from Gideon Toury’s theory that the definition of translation should be left to those who does and/or uses it, would understand what such persistent questioning is driving at.⁴ Yet one could naively continue: How do we all, in all our case-studies, know that what we study is translation? Is that because translators do it? Or is it because we, TS scholars, study it? (Toury’s pains to avoid the circularity of argumentation boomerang on us.) Or is that only the term, in whatever language associated somehow with the English word *translation*, that assures us that we are still looking at translation and not some other animal? Arguably, our scholarly TS common sense is our only guide, whether we admit it or not. We have seen translation long enough to recognize it even in the disguised post-colonial avatars but instead of trying to formulate what precisely makes translation translation, despite its name truly being legion, we still rely on our common sense, “rich yet disorganized, non-systematic, often inarticulate and ineffable knowledge [that] we use to conduct our daily business of” scholarly research.

To take leave of our common sense when we attempt to study translation from a sociological point of view is, however, absolutely imperative. Such is the indispensable requirement and challenge of sociology, which deals with supra-individual phenomena where common-sense logic does not apply. Even “when we believe ourselves to be free of common-sense judgements they take us over unawares,” and the reader of Durkheim’s *The Rules of Sociological Method* is advised not to forget this, because our “usual ways of thinking are more likely to be adverse rather than favourable to the scientific study of social phenomena [...]” (2004: 53)

Durkheim’s discussion of the key word for his study ‘suicide’ is interesting in comparison with TS’ predicament as regards the term *translation*. The word ‘suicide’ as it is used in daily conversations, Durkheim says, seems to make any definitions superfluous. Yet if the scientist relies on commonsensical usage of words, s/he

lay[s] himself open to the word so vaguely defined that it varies from one instance to another according to the demands of the conversation, but it also results in categories of quite different things being brought vaguely together under the same heading or else realities of the same kind being called by different names, since the classification which produces them does not derive from any methodical analysis, but merely expresses the confused impressions of ordinary people. [...] Thus our first task must be to decide the order of things that we propose to study under the heading of ‘suicide’. To do so, we shall consider whether, among different kinds of death, there are some which have in common characteristics that are objective enough to be recognized by any observer of good faith and particular enough not to be met with elsewhere, but at the same time close enough to those that are commonly understood by the term of ‘suicides’ for us to be able to employ this same term without violence to everyday usage. [...] (Durkheim 2006: 15-16)

Admittedly, in its short but dynamic history, TS initially took exactly the route advised by Durkheim—TS tried to define translation in as strict and scientific a way as Durkheim attempted to define suicide. Yet TS reconsidered its strategy seeing that too narrow (linguistic equivalence-centred) definitions did not work because they distorted the describing of the praxis and understandings of translation in all their complexity as observed over space and time. Then, Toury suggested to shed too narrow a vision of translation by suggesting the notion of ‘assumed translation’ (1982: 27; 1995: 31). This opened TS to the fecund research which has been conducted within both descriptive, and sociocritical, and cultural, and postcolonial, and sociological paradigms. Yet at the same time, TS has gone too far and, by claiming that defining translation is a moot question, laid itself at the mercy of uncritical commonsensical notions of translation offered by whoever, whenever and wherever. The three postulates, suggested by Toury, limiting understanding of translation and saving TS from anarchy have not been jettisoned but mentioning them is considered unacceptable, but if we scratch any relativized translation research, whether colonial or post-colonial, whether synchronic or diachronic, whether contemporary or historical, under the surface, we are sure to find an implied definition (for how can you study something without knowing at least vaguely what you are studying?) similar to Toury’s postulates lurking behind the scenes. The definition of translation has been considered so moot a question that it has virtually not been mooted any more. The result is that all research is underpinned by *some* basic, fundamental understanding of translation which is left undiscussed, and on the surface, researchers pile up commonsensical definitions of translation borrowed from practitioners or users. TS has come full circle and probably it is time to go back to where TS, enriched thanks to the relativization of the vision of translation, started. The time has come to unearth the implied visions of translation and explicate them; the time has come to move from Toury’s liberating definition of translation to his modifying postulates (although taking them out of predominantly literary context).

Translation should be inquired into with a great deal of *naïveté* in order to overcome our common sense. In this connection, it is instructive to see how Durkheim explained why it is necessary to look at social phenomena as things. First of all, he makes it clear that he does not mean to say that social facts are material things. He says that the former are “things by the same right as material things, though in a different way” and continues as follows:

What, in fact, is a thing? A thing differs from an idea in the same way that what we know from the outside differs from what we know from the inside. A thing is any object of knowledge which our understanding does not naturally penetrate; it is everything that we cannot adequately conceptualize by a simple process of mental analysis; it is everything that the mind cannot succeed in understanding except by going outside itself in the form of observations and experiments, which progress from the most external and most immediately accessible characteristics to those which are least visible and most profound. To treat facts of a certain order as things is not, therefore, to classify them in a particular category of reality; it is rather to observe a particular mental attitude towards them. We begin the study of them by adopting the principle that we are totally ignorant of what they are, and that their characteristic properties, like the unknown causes on which they depend, cannot be discovered even by the most careful introspection. (2004: 54-55)

With this kind of *naïveté*, we should, after all these decades of enriching and enlightening research, come back *ad fontes*. Such homecoming should observe the following principles (based on the principles in Durkheim 2004: 65-66):

- (1) We should guard against relapses of common sense in the form of preconceived notions (e.g., what translation, translator or agency are).
- (2) Research should identify and define phenomena which are put into the same group based on certain external characteristics.
- (3) The group under investigation should allow including all phenomena which fit the definition.
- (4) When translations are studied as social facts, they should be considered “from an aspect where they appear separate from their individual manifestations.”

Principle (4), if we choose to take heed of Durkheim’s vision of sociology, should alert us against all studies, which do not separate individual manifestations of social facts from their general aspects. This is not to say that such investigations are wrong but usually the risk is that the researcher (especially without sociological training) would concentrate on individual life-stories and forget that they are to be shown through the prism of the socially generalizable in them. (Emphatically, there is nothing wrong in writing biographies but one should think twice before claiming to have produced sociological research of translation or translator.) As Anthony Giddens helps us understand:

[...]most secondary interpreters of Durkheim have failed to connect his *analytical* discussion (and rejection) of individualism as a methodological approach to social theory with his *developmental* conception of the emergence of individualism as a morality brought into being by the growth of the differentiated division of labour. [...] Durkheim’s writings represent an attempt to detach “liberal individualism,” regarded as a conception of the characteristics of the modern social order, from “methodological individualism.” [...]Durkheim’s] attempt to detach moral from methodological individualism is much more subtle and profound than has been assumed by many of his critics, what results is a brittle synthesis and essentially an unsatisfactory one. (1971: 210, 222)

Giddens makes it clear that “sociology cannot be based upon a theory which treats the individual as the *starting-point* of analysis [...]” (1971: 211) One should be careful, if s/he claims to conduct sociologically informed research, to paint a portrait of a socialized individual, the focus and, hence, methodology should be verified and properly balanced.

Another manifestation of common sense in TS is that TS scholars do not properly discriminate between social activism and studying translation. Struggling for the social awareness of translation and translators/interpreters is a noble undertaking but it is not to be confused with scholarly research because such confusion is likely to result in a bias and conscious or subconscious distortions. Objectivity thrives on non-judgmental spirit and has nothing to do with rallying forces for a cause. In Durkheim’s words, “good and evil do not exist in science” (Durkheim 2004: 67). As Mary Douglas, studying religions building on Durkheimian theory, observes:

At very least, the moral bias has to be unloaded, and the language of exhortation and reprimand needs to be cooled. Appeal to the emotions has to be eliminated. This is precisely what Durkheim tried to do when he asked us to pay attention to ‘social facts’ and to abjure basing explanations on ‘psychology’. Wanting to establish a unified theory of society and knowledge, he needed to tidy up the language, to uncover hidden emotional cargoes and throw them overboard. (2008: xv)

As any science, sociology is postulated as “devoid, or nearly, of all practical effectiveness, and is therefore without real justification for its existence” (Durkheim 2004: 67). Translation theorists should not have a complex of inferiority and keep on justifying their research giving reasons why translation studies matter. The most common argument against translation theory is that it has little to help translation practitioners who either can translate without theory or need only some practical training. Translation theory exists because translation exists, and no doubt theory helps practice. The mechanism of their relationship can be seen as the mechanism of the relationship between language and linguistics. We can speak without linguistics, yet those who want to work with language surely perform better when they study how language and their own language(s) work which is explained to them by linguistics. Who questions the necessity to study linguistics? Translation practitioners, who deny the necessity of theory, may be gifted but shortsighted, and why should translation theorists listen to them? Should the linguist listen to a native speaker of a language who doubts the *raison d’être* of linguistics?

Another thing is how to justify TS when its existence is challenged by sister-sciences, such as applied linguistics and comparative literature. Without going into details, I would say that TS has not done enough in defining its unique subject matter, sticking obstinately to interlingual transfer and brushing aside suggestions to look into broader investigations of transfer phenomena. We may decide to return to “translation proper” (Jakobson 2000: 114), but we need to explore other types of translation in order to make a well-informed decision. Some explain their choice of interlingual translation saying that such translation does not presuppose the change of channel “with an increased number of differences from the ‘original’ in all layers, including the intentional one” (Dollerup 1999: 305). The problem with this kind of statements, however, is that although any translation student even superficially acquainted with TS functionalism would raise her/his eyebrows to the final clause, yet s/he is likely to agree with the refutation of intersemiotic translation (changing the channel) and would not be bothered to consider why not accepting the functionalist paradigm is any worse than not accepting intersemiotic translation? Or is the latter not translation and Jakobson-semiotician was simply carried away in including this transfer into the group of phenomena which he categorised as *translation*? If so, why is his article *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* considered a classic and included into TS readers? Perhaps, we had better exclude the article from our canon as a potential source of heresies? If he is right, however, by Principle (3) above, the group under investigation should include all phenomena, which fit the definition, and the job of the scholar is to investigate what makes intersemiotic translation similar to the other types of translation and in what it is different from them forming a subgroup. Arguably, it is in this kind of studies that the future of TS lies because such studies promise to provide TS with its unique and unrivalled subject matter.

4. Social Fact

What is a social fact? This is the central concept of Durkheim’s theory and one of his most important contributions to sociology. Social facts are defined by Durkheim as “ways of acting or thinking, recognizable by the distinguishing characteristic that they are

capable of exercising a coercive influence over individual consciousness” (2004: 56). Social facts as any social phenomena are external to individuals (Durkheim 2004: 55).

Describing the influence that social facts have on individuals, Durkheim introduces the notion of social constraint, which, according to him, implies

that collective ways of acting or thinking possess a reality outside the individuals who, at any moment in time, conform to it. They are things which have their own existence. The individual encounters them already formed and he can do nothing to eliminate them or to change them; he is obliged to take account of them and it is so much more difficult (though not impossible) for him to change them, since, in varying degrees, they share in the material and moral supremacy that society exercises over its members. (2004: 57)

Note that Durkheim does not deny that individuals have their role in creating social constraints. (His critics do not always duly appreciate this aspect of his theory.) Yet it always takes more than one individual to influence social facts. The resulting synthesis of individual wills is a product external to each participating individual taken separately. Hence, we pass on from individuals to institution, which Durkheim defines as “all beliefs and all modes of behaviour instituted by the collectivity [...]” (2004: 57). Therefore, sociology is “the science of institutions, their genesis and their functioning” (Durkheim 2004: 57). Importantly, only socially determined human actions are social facts. Biological functions, such as breathing or sleeping are not social facts; but social roles we play, for example as a member of a family or of an organization, are social facts because they are socially determined and, in that sense, the practices we follow “function independently of the use [we] make of them” (Durkheim 2004: 58).

The coerciveness of social facts is manifested in that they resist a change: “...social facts [are considered] as things whose nature, however flexible and malleable, is nevertheless not modifiable at will” (Durkheim 2004: 53). One is imprisoned if s/he breaks a law; one is deprecated if s/he does not act in accordance with a custom or does not meet expectations. Social facts are social exactly because they originate not with an individual. They “can have no other substratum than society, either the political society as a whole, or one of the groups that in part compose it, such as religious denominations, political, literary and professional associations, etc.” (Durkheim 2004: 59). Theorizing translation on the social level should always be conducted with this in mind: social facts, translation included, are “the proper field of sociology” (Durkheim 2004: 59).

At this point, Durkheim addresses those of his critics who think that his theory is making individual members of society marionettes:

It is true that when we define them [social facts] by the word ‘constraint’, we risk infuriating those who zealously support absolute individualism. Since they maintain that the individual is completely autonomous, it appears to them that the individual is diminished every time he is made to feel that he is not completely self-determined. But since it is indisputable that most of our ideas and inclinations are not developed by ourselves, but come from outside, they can only become part of us by being imposed upon us. [...] Yet] any social constraint does not necessarily exclude the individual personality. (2004: 59)

Among social constraints, there are well-defined social systems such as law, religious dogmas, financial institutions but also less defined such as social currents. The latter is obvious in a crowd or group protesting or supporting something. No individual can be identified as the source of the group’s enthusiasm or indignation. These emotions

are shared and intensified by the entire group; they come to each participant from outside. As long as we go along with this current we may think that there is no pressure exerted upon us; but this pressure will readily manifest itself as soon as we decide to resist the general flow. "We are, therefore, victims of an illusion, which makes us believe that we ourselves have produced what was imposed on us from outside [...]" (Durkheim 2004: 60)

TS has less difficulty with recognizing this dependence of statistically summed up translations or translators (schools, trends of translation) on social institutions (translation bureaus, publishing business, dominant norms and standards, etc.). It is, perhaps, more difficult for us to admit such influence or, rather, its heaviness on the individual level. There, it seems, somehow, the pressure is not as heavy. But it should be remembered that as the air pressure is no weaker or stronger on each individual human being than the crowd, so is the social pressure. We are still having a range of possibilities (from acting according to an imposed norm to resisting to act) but what is important and often forgotten is that the translator is always socially contextualized or, more precisely, socialized and her/his range of possibilities of action is determined by society even in what resistance options s/he has. Degrees of freedom are also socially determined. This becomes obvious if, for example, we compare how and for what a translator would be punished for her/his resistance in contemporary and medieval European society.

But the question is not so much about freedom or lack thereof. The key is social interdependence. This interdependence and its manifestations should be the subject of sociologically informed translation research. It is a challenge to go beyond the individual commonsensical visibilities.

At first sight [social facts such as inclinations towards suicide in a particular society] seem inseparable from the forms they assume in particular cases. But statistics provide us with the means of isolating them. [Studying individual phenomena is not excluded but should be complemented with statistical approaches:] For, since each of these figures includes all individual cases without discrimination, the individual circumstances which may play some part in producing the phenomenon cancel each other out and, consequently, do not enter into its determination. What the average expresses, therefore, is a specific state of the collective mind. (Durkheim 2004: 60-61)

To be sure, statistical methods of overcoming commonsensical view of social facts are not the only type of methods. Modern sociology employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and we, TS scholars, may learn more about them from sociologists.

Social things are the "embodiment of the ideas" people have about society and its institutions. Such ideas are the object of study of the sociologist (Durkheim 2004: 63). Yet the sociologist or the sociologist of translation should be careful about how and where these ideas may be found. Let us not forget that social things are things and that means they are to be treated as external entities and only as such, as external data, that they can be used in research.

In addition to what has been said above, society and social facts are also to be theorized as things in the sense of their social visibility. Somebody's thoughts are socially invisible until they become socially visible as gestures, words and phrases, behaviour, etc., that is, something that is communicable to other members of society. Such communicated things constitute social fabric, which is the subject matter of sociology, including the sociology of translation.

Modal clauses, such as *the translator must have felt/thought*, let alone *the translator dreamed about...*, are no more than the researcher's guesswork and have nothing to do with sociology, because no researcher has some magic X-rays that can directly penetrate the social *thing-in-itself*. We can judge about the thing, a stone or a beast or another human being or a social fact, only based on what is projected by that thing from inside out, made somehow detectable and observable. How can we be sure that the translator *dreamed about something*? Socio-translational facts are to be held separately from our guesses what translators think while producing translations. And what do those dreams, even if there were true, have to do with sociology? Once again, in Durkheim's own words:

[...] social phenomena are things and should be treated as things [...] they are the only data available to the sociologist. A thing is, in effect, everything that is given, offered, or rather forced upon, our observation. To treat phenomena as things is to treat them as data which provide the starting point for science. [...] Moreover, we must consider social phenomena in themselves, separate from the conscious beings who represent them; we must study them from the outside as external things, for it is in this guise that they appear to us. [...] Even phenomena which most seem to consist of arbitrary arrangements must still be considered from this perspective. (2004: 63-64)

But even if individual translators are studied properly, one should be very careful (and it is not easy for us translation scholars who largely cannot boast special sociological training) to keep a distance between her/himself and the object of study, that is, to see the translator/translation as a *thing-in-itself*, about which we can judge only based on social visible evidence, on the one hand, and the individual object of study (translator or translation) and the social context, on the other hand. The individual object of study should not be viewed as somebody/something, which can be added to another one and yet another one—and we get society. That is why, in studying social properties of translation, the researcher, when looking at the individual, should keep her/his eyes on the collective. Translation as a social fact cannot exist if there are no individual translation acts, yet, with translation it is exactly as with the 'society vs. individuals' dilemma: "society is not the mere sum of individuals, but the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics" (Durkheim 1982: 129). Therefore, individual translator's *habitués* are a necessary, but not sufficient condition of theorizing translation as a social phenomenon:

The group thinks, feels and acts entirely differently from the way its members would if they were isolated. If therefore we begin by studying these members separately, we will understand nothing about what is taking place in the group. (Durkheim 1982: 129)

5. Conclusion

There are more promising lines of research which Durkheim's classical thought prompts, than I have mentioned. For instance, it would be instructive to delve into the principles of distinguishing between normal and morbid, or pathological, social facts (2004: 68-70). This may lead the translation researcher to find ideas about how to study translation from the topological and comparative points of view and to resolve a conflict of opinions between what Durkheim calls the 'historian vs. philosopher' dispute or the nominalism of

the historians (who view societies as constituted of a multitude of individual and incomparable types) and the extreme realism of the philosophers (for whom “all special groupings [...] are only contingent and provisional aggregates without any individual reality,” “only humanity being real, and it is from the general attributes of human nature that all social evolution derives”):

Consequently, for the historians history is only a sequence of events which are linked together but do not repeat themselves; for the philosophers these same events have value and interest only as an illustration of the general laws which are inscribed in the constitution of men and which hold sway over the course of historical development. (Durkheim 1982: 108)

To be sure, these ideas would help shed more light on discussions about the degree of generalizations vs. particularizations in TS.

Another important issue is the pre-eminence of the collective in the sociological perspective as compared to the general. It is important to stress the hierarchy between the two, because common sense would have them in the opposite order and thereby missing the point about sociological facts as independent from their individual manifestations and simplistic qualitative conceptions of collectivity:

It may be objected that a phenomenon can only be collective if it is common to all members of the society, or at the very least, to a majority, and, therefore, if it is general. This is certainly so, but if it is general it is because it is collective (that is, more or less obligatory), rather than it being collective because it is general. It is a group condition which is repeated in the individuals because it is imposed upon them. It is found in each part because it is in the whole, rather than it being in the whole because it is in the parts. (Durkheim 2004: 61-62)

Such and similar fresh counter-intuitive sociological ideas may turn out a source of inspiration and definitely of revelation for translation students.

Earlier I made a point about the issues with the term *action* understood as a social fact vs. social activism. Yet another example may be provided where confusion in terminology issues may hamper methodologically clear theorizing. Such and similar problems might be encountered if cultural vs. social are not properly distinguished. It is suggested that translation as a cultural practice is associated with “power, ideology and similar issues” (Wolf 2010: 342). But both power and ideology are considered *bona fide* social issues actively discussed by leading sociologists, such as Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Nikolas Lehmann, Reinhardt Bendix, Julien Freund, Peter M. Belau and many others (Walkman, Tutsis, and Ziti 1977; Elias 1978; Lehmann 1975; Bauman 1990: 107-124). What is, then, the difference between cultural and social? If so, Andrew Chesterman is right in saying that the research which is categorized as informed by cultural studies, is, in fact, closer to sociology, and he urges us to draw a line between sociological and cultural issues. Adding psychological issues to these two categories, Chesterman suggests a tripartite map of translation research (in Duarte, Assis Rosa, and Seruya 2006, 11):

- 1) *cultural* (values, traditions, ideas and ideologies);
- 2) *sociological* (translators’ observable group behavior and the institutions in which they work);
- 3) *cognitive* (translation-related mental processes, decision-making).

It is still not quite clear on what grounds categories 1) and 2) are to be separated, since, according to Durkheimian logic, both are social facts and, hence, legitimate subjects of sociological research and, therefore, would require similar methodological approaches. In order to solve this problem, one should look into how sociology and cultural studies explain their relationship. Alternatively, perhaps, we should be content with the separation of translation research into psychological and social, as Durkheim suggests, and ask ourselves: What are manifestations of translation as social vs. psychological activity?

Finally, it should be said that it is advisable that TS scholars, in their attempts to theorize translation as a social activity, familiarize themselves with sociological theory. We should not dismiss classical sociological theories, thinking that the issues that concern the translation scholar today have changed so that classical theorists, like Durkheim, cannot help us anymore. TS, in its sociological attempts, when turning to Bourdieu, Luhmann, ANT, etc., does that over the head of the fathers of sociology, on whose theories modern sociology builds, and either misses some important points about theorizing the social completely or runs the risk of reinventing the wheel, exactly as Ian Craib warns us (1997: 2).

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NOTES

1. Since in this paper my purport is not so much to show translation as social action in terms of its structure and properties but to elaborate on it as a social phenomenon, I use the term ‘social action’ virtually as a synonym of the term ‘social action’, only with that difference that the latter is broader in its meaning and includes social action as its hyponym.

2. See more on Durkheim’s dichotomies ‘sociology/psychology’ and ‘collective vs. individual’ in Lukes 1971: 193-7.

3. It should be noted in passing that regrettably, the richer understanding of *agency*, suggested by the participants of the symposium ‘Translators’ Agency’ at the University of Tampere in 2008, fell victim to the same commonsensical equating translation’s agency only with human agency against which the editors of the symposium’s proceedings argued with the help of Buzelin. In their collective effort, they defined *agency* as “willingness and ability to act” where willingness is “linked to consciousness, reflectivity and intentionality, and it is not without some moral or ethical undertones” and “is largely individualistic and psychological by nature” (Kinnunen and Koskinen 2010: 6). How can non-human actors, like clams or computers (cf. Callon 1986), have such willingness? Also, psychology and sociology are not distinguished in the proposed definition.

4. Toury’s relativizing of defining translation which is crucial for making TS more inclusive for empirical research, crucial for post-colonial studies of translation, is commonly curtailed and the balancing part of it with the three postulates (the source postulate, the transfer postulate, and the relationship postulate) are often left out, on whatever grounds.

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